

## **How Western Anti-Muslim Bigotry Became Respectable: The Historic Roots Of A Newly Resilient Ideology**

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As scholars who work on the centuries-old Islamic presence in Europe and the continent's first post-Holocaust genocide against, not coincidentally, the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we were deeply disturbed but not surprised that an ostensibly tolerant and pluralistic Western democracy like Switzerland would vote by a margin of 57 percent to ban the religious symbol of 400,000 of its Muslim residents because they felt "threatened" by the grand total of four minarets that exist there.

The Swiss referendum was the tip of an iceberg reflecting both deep and age-old historic prejudice against a Muslim presence on the continent as well as a recent concerted ideological campaign to construct Muslims as the "other" on the part of rightwing racist movements in Europe and their fellow travellers in the neo-conservative and Southern Evangelical movements in the US. While secularism and constitutional safeguards for religious freedom are seen as hallmarks of the post-Enlightenment West, Europe and the West have traditionally been far more hostile to religious-cultural pluralism than Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu and Islamic societies, which historically viewed religious and cultural heterogeneity and pluralism as the natural order of things. This historic reality explains to a large degree why, in contrast to Europe, such religious diversity survived into the modern era in these societies, albeit not always harmoniously. Indeed, the famous thesis of the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne was that the very notion of "Christendom" or "the West" first emerged from the ruins of classical civilization in opposition to northern pagans and southern Muslim and Jewish infidels whose presence in Europe was actually coterminous with the spread of the Holy Roman Empire and Church in large areas of the continent.

While Paris was a collection of mud huts, Muslim Cordoba in the 10th century was the largest and grandest city in Europe with massive public baths, libraries, universities, underground sewers and even street lighting, which predated that of London by 700 years. Recent academic contributions by David Levering Lewis, Maria Rosa Menocal and Michael Hamilton Morgan have underscored how the uniquely tolerant multicultural civilization of Muslim Spain and the Levant played a central role in preserving and enhancing the philosophic and scientific legacy of Greece, Persia, India and China, directly laying the foundation of the European Renaissance itself. However, from neo-conservative ideologues such as Geert Wilders and Christopher Caldwell to Dutch and Austro-German politicians, conveniently forgetting the Ottoman origins of their tulips and kaffee kultur, the centuries-long European Muslim historic and cultural legacy has invariably been presented as transient and alien. Constructed as "aliens" in the European body politic, it is not surprising that European Muslims, Jews and Roma, from the Crusades to the Inquisition, and in our own era, the Holocaust and Bosnia, were the paramount targets of pogroms, ethnic cleansing and even genocide.

Even modern secularizing Western and south-eastern European countries have been historically intolerant of mosques, minarets, synagogues and other symbolic forms of non-Christian representation. Budapest, Belgrade and Athens, which lived under Ottoman Muslim rule for centuries, like the fabled southern Spanish Muslim cities of Granada and Cordoba, did not emerge into the 20th century with a single surviving mosque.

Even though Athens is home to an estimated 200,000 Muslims, it took enormous

controversy and the Olympic Games to be able to construct a single mosque. The same impediments are true of a number of European Union member states, which are obligated to maintain freedom of worship and non-discrimination. Germany is the EU member state with the largest Muslim population, boasting a minority estimated at 3 to 4 million people, but its capital city, Berlin, only has a single mosque with a clearly visible minaret that is located in the outskirts of the city next to Tempelhof Airport. While Germany has appropriately made great efforts to restore synagogues, which had been erased from the skyline in the 1930s, right-wing mobilization against the building of mosques, as in the case of Cologne, instead of being viewed as bigotry has been championed by populist politicians and the mainstream media.

### **Swiss referendum painfully ironic**

The Swiss referendum is particularly painfully ironic since its Muslim community is to a large extent made up of secular Balkan Muslims who survived ethnic cleansing and genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo. A hallmark of the Serbian and subsequent Croatian campaigns was to erase all vestiges of the unique and priceless Ottoman-Islamic architectural heritage in the region, with mosques and minarets as particular targets. At the time, one of the authors, Mujeeb Khan, was involved in lobbying efforts on behalf of the Bosnian state and had written in "East European Politics and Societies" that official British and French appeasement of the Serbian genocide reflected disturbing and deep-seated historic complexes against religious and cultural minorities in Europe. The White House historian Taylor Branch in his recent book "The Clinton Tapes" confirmed this, recounting how Paris and London insisted on maintaining the arms embargo on the defenseless Bosnians. "They justified their opposition on plausible humanitarian grounds, arguing that more arms would only fuel the bloodshed, but privately, said the president, key allies objected that an independent Bosnia would be 'unnatural' as the only Muslim nation in Europe. He said they favoured the embargo precisely because it locked in Bosnia's disadvantage." Branch, in conversation with Clinton continued: "When I expressed shock at such cynicism, reminiscent of the blind-eye diplomacy regarding the plight of Europe's Jews during World War II, President Clinton only shrugged. He said President François Mitterrand of France had been especially blunt in saying that Bosnia did not belong, and that British officials also spoke of a painful but realistic restoration of Christian Europe."

The recent British, French and Serbian policy reflected 19th century European efforts to solve the Ottoman "Eastern Question" by expelling the "Turks bag and baggage," in the words of William Gladstone, from Europe in a campaign of ethnic cleansing which would claim the lives of over 200,000 Ottoman Muslims and render 5 million refugees whose descendants comprise a good portion of modern-day Turks. While almost all nations commemorate their suffering and loss, this campaign of genocidal ethnic cleansing and a similar one against Muslims in the Caucasus and Crimea has hardly been discussed in the Turkish Republic due to efforts at erasing the past after the founding of the republic. At the time of the Bosnian slaughter, one of the writers, Mujeeb Khan, was the first to accurately predict that callous bigotry and indifference to the plight of highly secular and pacific European Muslims by the Western architects of "the new world order" in Iraq would catalyze militant movements across the Islamic world. He also pointed out that since the breakup of the Ottoman state, the Islamic world, unlike China and India, lacked for the first time a regional hegemon capable of preventing external invasions and undertaking industrial, technological and social development on a global scale and predicted that a democratizing Turkey would embrace her Ottoman-Islamic past and historic role of providing leadership and cohesion in the Muslim world. Such a momentous change is now, of course, under way with the election of the Justice and Development (AK Party) and the

development of the neo-Ottoman foreign policy, which has aroused tremendous popular support throughout the Muslim world and which, along with the re-emergence of China and India, might shift the global balance of power away from the West, where it has resided since 1750.

## **Borrowing from the tool kit of demagogues**

Sadly, the disgraceful example of bigotry and chauvinism set by Francois Mitterrand in Bosnia has been continued by the current French president, Nicolas Sarkozy. Instead of joining his foreign minister and prominent human rights activist Bernard Kouchner in condemning the Swiss referendum, Sarkozy wrote an editorial in Le Monde expressing sympathy and called upon French minorities to practice their faith "discreetly" while "humbly" deferring to the centrality of Christian culture and history in what is ostensibly a hyper-secular and egalitarian state. The high-profile intervention was part of his recently launched "debate on national identity" meant to appeal to populist French resentment of racial and religious minorities. Borrowing from the tool kit of demagogues everywhere, Sarkozy identified a few dozen burqa-wearing women in a country of 65 million as the gravest threat confronting the nation. A few days after Sarkozy's Le Monde essay, the main mosque in the town of Castres was vandalized with swastikas and graffiti stating "France for the French" and "Sieg Heil." France's leading anti-racism organization, SOS Racisme, noted that such incidents and even more serious ones involving murder and injury grew out of the politically expedient appeals to racial and religious fears and intolerance by leading politicians starting with the president of the republic himself.

The legitimization of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant bigotry in the European mainstream has allowed formerly ostracized far-right Neo-Nazi and Fascist-oriented groups such as the British National Party, the Vlaams Belang of Belgium, the Liga Norda of Italy, the National Front in France and the Danish and Swiss people's parties to present themselves as respectable political movements. They have done this by distancing themselves from traditional anti-Semitic ideology, which continues to be viewed as abhorrent and often illegal, while openly espousing anti-Muslim bigotry, which is seen as much more politically correct and often reflecting mainstream political and media opinion.

In this, they have been greatly helped by anti-Muslim American neo-conservatives allied with people such as Mark Steyn, Daniel Pipes, Norman Podhoretz and Charles Krauthammer. During the Obama presidential campaign, the use of Muslim identity as a slur and form of innuendo was as vicious as any anti-Semitic whispering campaigns found in troubled parts of Eastern Europe. CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and Glenn Greenwald of Salon.com have documented how leading Republican politicians have long casually spewed anti-Muslim bigotry without any repercussions. Congressman Peter King of New York has stated that "there are too many mosques in this country," and GOP representatives Sue Myrick (North Carolina), John Shadegg (Arizona), Paul Broun (Georgia) and Trent Franks (Arizona) have collaborated with the far-right extremist and white supremacist Dave Gaubatz in demanding that young American Muslims not be allowed to serve as interns in Congress.

## **An unholy alliance**

In this anti-Muslim campaign, neo-conservatives have an unholy alliance with followers of Armageddon theology in many Southern Evangelical churches, including the likes of Sarah Palin, who view Muslims as the anti-Christ and feel that Jesus will not return until the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are destroyed and the Jewish Temple replete with animal sacrifices in Jerusalem rebuilt. Both the reverends Pat Robertson and Franklin Graham have demanded that Islam be banned as a violent religion while enjoying intimate ties with the

highest levels of the GOP and while continuing to preach a theology of hate, itself directly linked to historical crimes against African, Native, Hispanic and Asian Americans in the US. Such views and those of European anti-Muslim bigots such as Wilders and the late Oriana Fallaci, who channelled Der Stürmer in complaining that Muslims breed like rats, have been given prominent positive coverage in neo-conservative media outlets like the Weekly Standard, The National Review, The Wall Street Journal and of course Fox News. The problem with these forms of bigotry is that they quickly spread to other ethnic, racial and religious targets as well, as witnessed by recent anti-Hispanic and anti-immigrant hysteria in the US, posing ominous questions about the future of coexistence in now extremely diverse Western societies.

Bigots and chauvinists, like bullies everywhere, direct their vitriol toward those seen as weak and defenceless. Because China and India have emerged with a continental-scale hegemonic state and market structure in their historic domains of civilization, they are treated with great deference by Western statesmen and would-be hate-mongers like Rupert Murdoch of the News Corporation alike, a lesson Muslims would do well to ponder in the wake of campaigns of genocide, ethnic cleansing and destruction in their historic lands.